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ABSTRACT

Action Learning (AL) is one instructional method used to bridge the gap between theory and practice in university courses. This study reports the results of a pilot test that applied AL techniques to an educational leadership preparation program. Participants were 47 doctoral students, most of whom were practicing administrators or teacher leaders. Participants worked on sets of actual problems provided by school districts and a community college (clients). The study employed Merriam's descriptive case-study method. Documents reviewed include email correspondence between participants and clients, memoranda, meetings minutes, participants' reflective journals, and presentations to clients. Results of the study persuaded facilitators and instructors to continue to use AL because, among other reasons, AL: (1) adds validity to the leadership program and to students by providing pathways to the workplace; (2) appeals to most participants; (3) allows participants to apply earlier academic learning to real problems; (4) enhances participants' understanding of themselves as leaders; (5) helps leaders deal with ambiguity and adversity; (6) helps leaders build community; (7) fosters better relationships with local educational agencies; and (8) provides insights into why it is difficult to change educational institutions. (Contains 55 references and an outline of contributions and limitations of various instructional methods.) (WFA)

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Bridging the Abyss: Adding Value and Validity to Leadership Development Through Action Learning—Cases-in-Point

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Overview of the Paper

Florida Atlantic University, as most educational leadership programs, strives for relevancy in preparing educational leaders. As we rethought our program three years ago, we desired to add value to our university, students, and professional communities in the development and preparation of educational leaders. We studied various methodologies available to us to connect to the world of practice and decided to adopt action learning. We invited a noted Action Learning scholar to campus to share the concept, benefits, and pitfalls with our faculty and students. We engaged our professional communities in supporting the concept. We decided to pilot test the concept and study the results. This paper contains the results of our pilot test.

We simply wished to answer the question, is action learning a leadership development activity that can be used by university educational leadership preparation programs to bridge the gap between theory and practice? Action learning (AL) has two basic goals: (a) solve the organizational problem, and (b) engage in learning that can be used elsewhere in a real-time situation. In AL, the first priority is *learning;* the second is *solving the problem*. This study used a multiple case-study design. Nine action learning sets in two different graduate classes are incorporated into a report of our conclusions. Documents reviewed included items such as email correspondence to class members and clients, memoranda, agendas, minutes of set meetings, set contracts, class members' reflective journals, observations of set meetings and final presentations to clients, with the final set report.

We found eight points of relevance that convinced us to continue to use action learning to close the abyss: (a) Action learning is intuitively appealing to most of the participants; (b) Action learning helps leaders deal with ambiguity and adversity; (c) Action learning helps leaders to build community; (d) Action learning builds basic leadership skills in a safe environment; (e) Action learning reinforces managerial, transformational, political and professional aspects of leadership; (f) Action learning is a meaningful class.... frustrating, but meaningful; (g) Action learning allows participants to apply previous academic learnings to real problems; and, (h) Action learning allows participants to understand themselves as developing leaders.

We concluded that action learning adds validity to our leadership program and students by providing pathways to the workplace. We see the following benefits of action learning to the university and its professors: (a) student application of knowledge in a real setting, (b) insights about why educational institutions are so difficult to change, and (c) better relationships with local educational agencies.

Introduction

In the book, Educational Administration: A Decade of Reform (1999), Nelda Cambron-McCabe reflects on her work with the Danforth Foundation's Forum for the American School Superintendent. She explains how the Forum provided her with a looking glass through which to examine her assumptions about leadership and the practices in the field. She comments how this work left her "with substantial concerns about the lack of connection between the nature of educational administration programs and the crisis of conditions facing many school administrators in our nation " (p. 217). This crisis centered on how to make learning more authentic for students and how to connect discrete boundaries of knowledge within educational administration with other disciplines so as to gain fresh insights to intractable and emerging problems for leadership development.

Making the connection from classroom to leadership development and practice is the crux of this paper. For without addressing how to bridge the abyss between theory and practice, questions will continually be raised about the value and validity of educational leadership programs as they relate to the "real" work of school leaders. Attempting to bridge the abyss between theory and practice has taken many forms in the evolution of educational leadership programs (e.g., simulations, case studies, action research, problem-based learning, and most recently action learning).

Action learning (AL) is an emerging leadership development activity with two basic goals: (a) solve the organizational problem, and (b) engage in learning that can be used elsewhere in a real-time situation. In AL, the first priority is *learning;* the second is *solving the problem*. The focus on learning also distinguishes AL from task forces, teams, quality circles, committees, and work groups. Unique features of working with an authentic problem and a live client set apart this method from other leadership development tools, such as case studies, simulations, action research, and problem-based learning. We argue that action learning offers some distinct and unique advantages for connecting practitioners to the work of school leaders today. It combines action and knowledge and is supportive of Young-Soo, Germann, and Patton's (1998) claim that the entire educational context must shift in order to prepare students for their futures:

> Theoretical underpinnings in cognitive psychology, as well as other forces, are pushing education and especially professional education toward learning through problem solving, authentic projects, apprenticeships, and field experiences, and toward learners who act as reflective practitioners. (p. 3)

It is also supported by other scholars who also agree that problem solving and critical thinking are essential cognitive skills that students must develop in order

to ensure their academic and professional success (Morris, 1977; Landis, 1995; MacGuire and Halpin, 1995).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to assess the potential of AL as a leadership development activity to be used by university educational leadership preparation programs as well as school districts and institutions of higher education for professional development purposes. The primary focus of the paper is on the learning aspects of AL. Nevertheless, solving organizational problems presented by the clients are equally important. These problems are and do provide the real-time pressure and high stakes atmosphere that surround a typical AL activity. In fact, the recommendations made by the AL groups (or "sets" as they are referred to in the literature) significantly impact the clients' work processes and procedures.

This paper begins with a description of various instructional methods and a comparison of the contributions and limitations of each method to the area of educational leadership. Finally, we suggest the benefits of implementing the AL method for (a) students, (b) university educational leadership programs, and (c) clients.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework draws on an historical review of simulations, case studies, action research, problem-based learning, and action learning for leadership development. First, we examine how simulations (e.g., exercises such as in-baskets, role playing, or group conference experiences) provide future leaders with hands-on experiences (Galbraith, 1990). Next, we analyze how case studies, emerging in the 60's, afforded another venue for "hands-on" learning. Third, we investigate how the field focused on action research in the 80's and why it continues into the present day, embracing individuals solving "real" problems together. Fourth, we delve into problem-based learning, a 90's phenomenon, which focuses on team learning and teamwork. Lastly, we examine action learning, which unlike the more traditional classroom style learning promotes "new" leadership skills (Dotlich and Noel, 1998).

Simulations

Simulations involve students in re-creating within the classroom some of the dilemmas, crises, and problems they have experienced or are experiencing outside. Galbraith, cited in Brookfield (1990), posits that there are two types of simulation exercises: (a) crisis decision simulation and (b) training simulation. A crisis decision simulation requires participants to respond immediately to an imagined crisis without the benefit of clear guidelines concerning what is morally right or culturally appropriate. By participating in authentic simulations, or valid

reconstructions of recognizable crises, (i.e., in-basket exercises, role-playing, group-centered experiences), students are able to develop contextual awareness, imaginative speculation, and assumption analysis. Short simulations and student-acting provide important learning experiences, keep students involved in new and enjoyable ways of learning, motivate them, promote interaction among them, and present relevant real-life situations (Hativa, 2000). During simulation activities, students tend to be made more aware of their own assumptions, especially since they have to respond to each other's requests for explanations and justifications to support decisions made. Moreover, Lepper and Chabay (1985) showed that simulations lead to high attention and deep processing, and thus contain a large potential for promoting learning.

Case Studies

Case studies are stories, based either on real-life examples or fictitious situations, which place students in the role of decision-maker or problem-solver. Based on the work of Christensen (1948), case studies were slowly introduced into business management curricula in the 1960's as a type of "hands-on learning, " and eventually found their way into educational leadership programs. This method requires students to apply theories and models they are currently studying, and it promotes their active learning and use of higher-order thinking skills (Hativa, 2000). Students must read and think about the case ahead of time in order to be prepared to discuss it in class. The case study method of instruction can easily be adopted and used in various courses (Fuchs, 1974; Henderson, 1993; Redekop, 1984). An advantage of the case study method is the application of decision-making among students, an important skill for leaders. Case studies are noted for "bridging the divide between theory and practice in education, since a case can both embody the reality of practice and provide evidence of theories in use" (Miller and Kantrov, 1998, p. 5).

A particular principle or type of problem from a variety of fields can be used in case studies, along with simulations and games, which involve students in solving actual problems. Case studies engage acquiring, recalling, and using information, or applying theory leaned in class to solve problems (McKeachie, 1994). They enhance critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills. Henderson (1983) claims "cases allow students all the opportunities to be creative, to practice the design process, and to learn from others' mistakes with none of the drawbacks of actually being responsible for the project" (p. 291). Yorke (1981) points out that sharp distinctions, however, are difficult to draw between simulations and case studies because their characteristic features overlap. Case studies are based on actual practice so they may be complex, perhaps interdisciplinary, and provide opportunities for students to develop a more in-depth understanding of the issues. Simulations, on the other hand, often involve more precise rules for the students to engage in the activities and complete the replication.

Action Research

The origins of action research are attributed to the work of Kurt Lewin, a German born, American psychologist. Lewin (1947) focused on the development of a collective problem-solving cycle for improving life in organizations. He emphasized collective study rather than individualistic problem-solving and advocated group work as part of the action research process because of its power in gaining commitment and support for changes in individuals' attitudes and behaviors (1948). Lewin defined action research as a three-step process of (a) planning, (b) taking action, and (3) fact-finding about the results of the action.

Action research has been used in educational settings for some time. Two defining features of action research are that (a) the learning process is cyclical, and (b) it involves the collection and analysis of personally meaningful, local data to guide and improve practice. When used at a university setting, a student identifies a systemic issue and gathers data to show evidence of the extent of the problem in the system. The student plans an intervention, collects, and analyzes data in relationship to the effectiveness of the intervention, and feeds information back into the system to encourage participant dialogue, reflection, and changes in attitudes and later behaviors. Often, after the student completes an extensive literature review on best practices, and before the intervention is planned, staff members engage in extensive professional development to better understand the issue. An obvious limitation of applying action research at the university level is the fact that students work on their projects, rather then a collective focus when action research is initiated at the school site.

Corey (1949) was one of the first researchers to officially promote action research in the field of education. He believed that school practitioners would make better decisions and implement more effective practices if they conducted research as part of their decision-making process and then used the results to guide their selections or modifications of educational practices. Carl Glickman (1990), a professor at the University of Georgia, urges educators to adopt the practices of action research for school renewal and organizational development. Other educators also have promoted the benefits of action research (see Goodlad, Calhoun, and Sagor) because action research supports collaborative organizational development in meaningful ways; it promotes change from within and builds professional expertise, capacity and competency—all ingredients of the learning organization.

Problem-Based Learning

Barrows (1984) was the pioneer of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in medical education. This alternative approach for preparing school leaders is conceived of as a method of instruction and an approach to building a curriculum that employs complex, interdisciplinary problems taken from professional practice as the starting point for learning (Bridges, 1992). PBL places students in the role

of the school administrator through the use of contextualized problem scenarios, wherein they must work with others to understand and solve problems associated with school leadership. PBL specifically intends to familiarize prospective principals with various types of problems they will face in their future roles and to develop their skills of understanding and solving problems (Bridges, 1992). PBL is based on working in groups to achieve understanding or resolution of complex real-world problems. This method aims to promote students' problem-solving skills, to help them think critically, to learn how to learn, and to achieve better communication skills (Hativa, 2000). Bolman and Deal (1993) point out that problem-framing is no easy task in the modern organization, and the manner in which a problem is framed determines the script that ultimately guides the action. They note:

> Leaders in particular are required to make sense of ambiguous, complex, and puzzling events. When they frame accurately and respond appropriately, puzzles and problems become promising opportunities. When frames distort or overlook essential elements of a situation, leaders "lose the bubble," feel out of control, and fall back on familiar scripts even if their actions only make things worse. (p. 23)

Successful principals must be skilled in their ability to understand, formulate, and solve problems. Proponents of PBL assume that learning involves both knowing and doing—team learning and teamwork in a simulated environment (Bridges and Hallinger, 1995). Because of the highly contingent nature of school leadership, improving the quality of administrators' problem solving abilities is more likely to be productive in preparing principals than a focus on teaching specific actions or behaviors (Leithwood and Steinbach, 1992).

Action Learning

Action Learning was born in England in the 1930's, where the father of the process was Reg Revans, a Cambridge physicist. He observed that through the sharing of problems and asking probing questions of other scientists, together they could offer insights that were significant. In the 1950's, Revans codified his work in action learning and continued applying his learning principles to his work as a professor in industrial administration. In 1982 he sponsored the first MBA program based exclusively around action learning beliefs.

Action learning is a process of learning and reflection that happens with the support of a group of colleagues ("set") working with real problems with the intention of getting things done (McGill and Beaty, 1995). Revans (1997) believed that action learnings is difficult to describe because it is so simple. McGill and Beaty (1995) defined it as "a continuous process of learning and reflection, supported by colleagues, with the intention of getting things done" (p. 21). Similarly, Inglis (1994) defined action learning as "a process which brings people together to find solutions to problems and, in doing so, develops both the

individuals and the organization" (p. 3). Dilworth (1998a) defines action learning most clearly in that,

> Action learning is a process of reflecting on one's work experience and beliefs in a supportive/confrontational environment of one's peers for the purpose of gaining new insights and resolving real business or community problems in real time. (p. 28)

Action learning is unlike more traditional classroom style learning that relies on case studies and leadership theory to teach "new" leadership skills (Dotlich and Noel, 1998). Instead, teams of five to eight participants work in "sets" to address the client's identified real and challenging organizational problems or projects within an authentic time practice setting. According to Marquardt (1999), AL programs are built around five distinctive interactive components: (a) the problem, (b) the set, (c) the process, (d) the client, and (e) the facilitator.

The problem. The problem must be salient to the AL participants. In other words, the outcome of the problem solutions must matter to them (Dixon, 1998). Participants within the small group (set) may all work on the same problem or different problems (Froiland, 1994). In addition, the problem(s) may either deal with strategic issues (what to do), or tactical issues (how to do it) (Dilworth, 1998a).

The set. The action learning set (ALS), or group, refers to the four to six action learners who work together to solve the problem(s). Each set member acts as a consultant, an advisor, and a devil's advocate for every other set member (Inglis, 1994). The set members need not be specialists, but they must be competent and committed to the process. In order to see the problem with "fresh eyes," the sets should be composed of people from diverse disciplines and/or present problems with which they are unfamiliar (Dixon, 1998).

The process. The process is derived from the interaction of three major elements: programmed knowledge (P), questioning (Q), and reflection (R). In other words, Learning (L) = P + Q + R. Factual information, or knowledge, about the problem is gathered on an ongoing basis. Hypothesis forming and questioning occurs during set meetings and centers around a continuous learning cycle composed of five questions:

- What are we trying to do?
- What is stopping us?
- What might we try?
- Who knows about this problem?
- Who can do anything about this problem?

Finally, reflection takes place before, during, and after set meetings. Students maintain an individual reflective journal addressing their personal learning experiences throughout the course. Journals are updated on a weekly basis and focus on questions such as:

- When were you most engaged?
- When were you most distanced?
- When were you most puzzled?
- When were you most affirmed?
- What is the most significant thing you experienced?
- What personal learning goal (s) have you set for yourself and why are they significant to you?
- And, how will you apply it in the future?

The client. The client is the person, or organization, who owns the problem at hand. Clients may refer to educational leaders in the community (i.e., school district boards, district office personnel, school principals, and community college presidents). These leaders identify real problems to which they seek a solution. The ALS members work as a cooperative, learning group to define the problem, ask questions, collect and analyze data, form conclusions, present findings, and make recommendations. The clients, then, are ultimately committed to taking action on the recommendations.

The facilitator. The role of the facilitator, or professor in this case, is as a set advisor and is most important at the beginning of the action learning process. The set advisor increases group cohesiveness by explaining the AL process to the group and, when necessary, building appropriate interpersonal skills. In addition, the set advisor may increase the confidence and commitment of the client through open communication with the client. Once the group has started, the set advisor may assist individuals in gaining a better self-perception and may act as a resource by asking appropriate questions or suggesting appropriate references.

Summary

AL, like the other instructional methods, has evolved over time. Each method has contributed some defining aspect of value and validity to educational leadership programs and leadership development. Figure 1 presents a summary of the contributions and limitations of each method.

Instructional Method	Contributions	Limitations
Simulations	• Enables one to learn directly from experience. • Develops an understanding of complex social situations that influences decision-making processes. • Promotes a high level of critical thinking (i.e., developing alternative strategies, anticipating those others will suggest). • Empathizes with the real-life person being portrayed. • Provides feedback on the consequences of actions and decisions made. • Involves both cooperation (within groups) and competition (between groups). • Enables teachers and students to uncover misconceptions and misinformation since it requires them to assess the realism of the situation. • Helps to motivate students.	• Involves a portrayal of selected events and may result in a simplistic view of reality. • Demonstrates how people *may* behave rather than how they *will* behave. • Lacks appropriate information for teaching factual information. • Can easily become overly complex, leading to confusion • Time-consuming and may impede coverage of a specific amount of content. • Changes traditional role of teacher from provider of information to a facilitator of learning—difficult for some. • Commercially developed simulation games are expensive and require professional development on use and implementation.
Case Studies	• Are realistic. Analyzing a portrayal of reality that is about as close to the real thing as possible. • Captures the interest and imagination of the learner. • Has advantage over other simulated techniques because it can deal with a larger slice of reality. • Case analysis treats feelings as facts. • Provides bridge between school and real-life experiences by capturing and analyzing real problems.	• Is *not* reality, even though it is a portrayal of reality. • Runs the risk of favoring a particular point of view. • Tends to collapse time and space dimensions, as well as emphasizes positive action—actions that may not be justified, solutions may not be feasible. • Is time-consuming. • Limits the content material that can be covered. • Not designed for the material being taught and may limit the effectiveness of the learning experience. • Tends to over-generalize from studying only one case. • Students may not see relevance to own situation. • Could lead to insufficient information, which might lead to inappropriate results.

Figure 1: Contributions and Limitations of Various Instructional Methods

Figure 1. (continued)

Instructional Method	Contributions	Limitations
Action Research	• Provides opportunity to interact with peers. • Provides relevance to learning. • Identifies systemic problems. • Involves collection and analysis of personally meaningful, local data as a guide to improving practice. • Engages members in reflection, dialogue, and change process.	• Is less appropriate for very large groups • Requires previous knowledge and advanced research skills • Doesn't work with uncooperative participants. • Personalities may overshadow content. • Must be conducted to look at best practices. Sometimes, educators are not clear on which practices to select for an intervention.
Problem-Based Learning	• Is the starting point for learning is a problem (that is, a stimulus for which an individual lacks a ready response). • Contains problems that they are apt to face as future professionals. • Is organized around problems rather than the disciplines. • Collectively, assumes a major responsibility for their own instruction and learning. • Occurs within the context of small groups rather than lectures and focuses on inquiry. • Uses resources and critiques and shares resources with others • Results in a tangible product.	• Wades through an overwhelming amount of information • Produce feelings of initial anxiety. • Requires much preparation on the part of the professor. • May cause students to feel that the work is busy work as it is not a real setting, but a problem in a contrived setting.
Action Learning	• Is centered on the need to find a solution to a real problem. • Involves observation of the problem, reflection and hypothesis forming, and action. • Is learner-driven. • Is as important to find the solution to the problem as engaging in the process. • Is a highly visible, social process, which may lead to organizational change. • Develops leadership skills that facilitate collaboration. • Develops skills related to self-directed learning, cooperative, problem solving, and implementation of change.	• Takes time. • Political and emotional aspects of the group process must also be considered. • Is difficult to implement in cultures with largely didactic approaches to education. • Is concerned about misinterpretation—action learning is frequently confused with "learning by doing."

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Methodology

This paper presents the results of a cross case analysis of nine action learning sets (ALS) from the eyes and hearts of the participants engaged in the first action learning classes in the Department of Educational Leadership at Florida Atlantic University during the Fall 2000 and Summer 2001 semesters. This study employed Merriam's (1988) descriptive case study method. The unit of analyses is the individual member in each of the ALS's.

Participants

The first class involved 30 doctoral students divided into six action learning sets of five participants working on six problems offered by public school and community college clients. The duration of activity was twelve weeks. The participants met in a class setting six times during the activity. Additional ALS meetings were held weekly. The majority of the participants were either practicing administrators or teacher leaders. There were also four full time doctoral student participants. Each ALS was composed of five doctoral students who met the following criteria: (a) completed all coursework, and (b) passed the comprehensive doctoral examination. The professor had prior knowledge of participant capacities since he had taught them in another doctoral-level course.

The class was presented with six problems: four offered by two school districts and two offered by one community college. These problems were: (a) teacher recruitment and retention in hard to staff schools, (b) the role of innovation zones (smaller administrative units) in a large district, (c) reasons why students failed to return to a community college, (d) the involvement of school advisory teams in a site based management school district, (e) the potential of a school district's scaling up of a newly purchased reading program, and (f) the success of students getting information on career-to-work programs across a distributed community college campus. One problem was assigned to each of the sets.

Similarly, the second class included 17 students working in three sets on three additional problems. These problems included: (a) county-wide teacher shortages, (b) improving reading achievement in a high school, and (c) establishing reading criteria to evaluate pilot reading programs considered for adoption in one, large metropolitan school district.

The following analysis does not address the results of the recommendations each ALS offered their clients. However, it should be noted that all clients were pleased with the final results. In five cases the school districts used the results by asking the ALS's to present their findings to top administrative councils and school boards. Additionally, one ALS saved a school district from investing in a 4 million dollar proposed expansion of a reading program that internal staff was proposing. Both of the community college ALS's

produced results to change procedures and work processes to become more efficient in dealing with student enrollment and access to the educational opportunities.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection consisted of first gathering all data about the case. Descriptive data were gathered and read regarding initial steps, content analysis of participants' learning journals, team process survey reports, evaluations by professors and clients, and focus group interviews. The data were first organized within each of the nine action learning sets to portray how set members acted, developed, and were affected by the process as they proceeded through the experience.

As Patton (1990) suggested, data analysis required many readings of the learning journals to identify themes and categories. Data were coded, sorted, analyzed, re-sorted, and re-analyzed to allow patterns to emerge in an iterative fashion. Then, common themes and patterns were extracted across the readings of all the sets' artifacts (i.e., learning to work together, learning about themselves, and learning to work with clients). There were many meaningful insights, which were not reported here due to space limitations.

Findings

Eight assertions regarding the value of action learning for leadership development were collectively drawn from the nine cases:

1. Action learning is intuitively appealing to most of the participants.
2. Action learning helps leaders deal with ambiguity and adversity.
3. Action Learning helps leaders to build community.
4. Action learning builds basic leadership skills in a safe environment.
5. Action learning reinforces managerial, transformational, political and professional aspects of leadership
6. Action Learning is a meaningful class—frustrating, but meaningful.
7. Action learning allows participants to apply previous academic learnings and theory to real problems.
8. Action learning allows participants to understand themselves as developing leaders.

These eight assertions form the framework for reporting the findings. The reporting strategy allows the voices of the participants to be heard, using their own words. The names of the participants have been changed to protect their privacy. We are deeply appreciative to these students for allowing us to tell their story.

Assertion 1: Action Learning is intuitively appealing to most of the participants. Action learning (AL) is built around a problem. It involves a diverse team of people working together on significant problems over a relatively long period of time. In essence learning occurs by doing, in a controlled environment. It requires time for questioning and reflection, as well as time for sharing leanings. The AL cycle involves: (a) asking fresh questions, (b) unfreezing underlying assumptions, (c) creating new connections and mental models, and (d) rebalancing programmed instruction and questioning insight. These three components of action learning were appealing to the participants.

First, it made sense to the participants that one would have to get the questions first: the right questions. Only then could one apply what is known, researched and codified. This concept of action learning was intuitively appealing to most of the participants.
I was most engaged when I was learning the elements of L=P+Q+R, and the interrelationships of program knowledge, questioning, and reflection.

Participants, however, would find it even more compelling to their development if the equation included implementation (I) as Marquardt (1999) suggested and as one student argued:

> There should be a contract between the organization (client) and the set that the solution that is reached will be implemented. I do not believe that this component will be part of our project; however, if you attempt to use this method in the work place, you would want to include this final portion of the formula—L=P+Q+R+I. The promise to implement is one factor that makes this approach different than working on a task force.

The action learning process stops with recommendations to the client. Students have no control over whether the client uses the recommendations. Further, action learning differs from traditional ways of addressing problems. As Dilworth (1998b) asserts, in a traditional problem solving case you are presented with the problem and *then* (emphasis added) you go to the library to find what has been already discovered (P). Whereas, traditionally, one begins to address the problem from programmed knowledge, in action learning, the order is reversed. You first ask the questions (Q), for example, what needs to be understood? Then you go to the library (programmed knowledge) and ask the second question: What is relevant in the programmed knowledge to this problem? It is a new way of addressing problems, one that participants view as closer to the reality of the workplace. One ALS member stated it this way,

> The most significant learning from class today was the realization that a key characteristic of a leader is his/her ability to ask the right questions. And, the key to developing good questioning skills is the ability to listen and the ability to get to the heart or core of the problem or issue. A leader has to be able to get beyond the superficial. Getting "real" answers is incumbent on the leaders ability to gain trust. People need to believe that information they reveal is not going to be used against them or in a negative manner. It's about being able to divulge without the fear of repercussion - knowing that it's okay to disagree, and still be respected and valued for whom you are and what you can contribute to the group.

Second, participants found that the notion that learning is as important as action was compelling. AL places equal emphasis on accomplishing the task and on the learning (i.e. development) of the individuals and organizations. Although we don't call group work in my workplace "action learning" I know that with just a little more effort that is exactly what it could be. The positive side to action learning in a professional setting is that it capitalizes on the idea of a group of people learning and using a process of learning to solve a problem. I can think of many times that it would have been successful in addressing issues in my workplace.

Third, the AL notion that professionals should look at situations with "fresh eyes," leading to fresh questions, stayed with the participants throughout the duration of the activity.

> Jack - It made sense when we discussed the rationale for placing the team members in unfamiliar surroundings. We would have a different perspective, without preconceived ideas. The concept of "fresh eyes" was indeed the catch phrase of the day.
>
> Another student agrees.
>
> The whole idea of asking "fresh questions" but not carrying an attitude of being the "expert" jives very well with my personal philosophy of leadership. I totally agree that leadership is not knowing the answers but knowing what questions to ask AND knowing the options and resources available to be applied to the problem.
>
> Mary - I actually find the idea of having professionals, with different areas of expertise coming together to tackle a problem refreshing. I also learned that solutions to problems sometimes come from outside sources who view the situation through "fresh eyes" better than through the eyes of someone from within the organization. I also like that this could be approached using a medley of disciplines. What makes this course intriguing, at least from this vantage point, is looking at how each member

> could bring his or her strengths to the team. I like the idea that there are so many facets of knowledge that the concept spans, from the psychological to the organizational to the opportunity for personal growth. And, finally, participants thought action learning was helpful in solving organizational problems.

Let's hope, as Revans said, that action learning really does give professionals power to address chaos. As one student said,

> It really does take a group to approach a project like this. Aside from group work being the premise of action learning teams, there is no way that one person could have made as much progress as we did as a group. We pulled together and were able to walk away hoping that our work will make a difference (based on the positive reception, I truly hope that it will). This was one of the most effective groups I have ever worked with, and have a better grasp of the importance of team learning.

Assertion 2: Action learning helps leaders deal with ambiguity and adversity. AL helped participants to deal with the triangle of ambiguity, pressure, and adversity. The ambiguity of the unstructured problem they were faced with led to a dissonance participants had seldom felt in other arenas. Victor expressed his concern of not overcoming the ambiguity this way,

> We met with the team during class. I am more than a little concerned that the group is not working cohesively. I had previously worked with a cohesive team for the past two years. The trust, knowledge of strengths just isn't there with this group. I am concerned that if we do not develop some type of work structure, this project may not be a team effort. Although we worked on norms in the group, I don't think the project is clear enough. I am feeling the physical distance of the group members is large and time is a factor. I cannot even contact everyone in my team because it is long distance.

Many participants were overwhelmed with the extensiveness of the problems they were asked to solve and the balancing it with their personal and professional lives. For example,

> I truly felt overwhelmed. Due to the personal issues I alluded to last week and to the neglect of my dissertation topic. I did not feel excited about pushing my goals aside in order to research someone else's problem.

AL also helped participants to deal with adversity. Adversity was a fact of life in each the six sets. Adversity stemmed from interpersonal relations among set members and time pressures of an authentic high stakes problem. There are several aspects of AL that put time pressure on the participants. These pressure points center on learning to work collaboratively, the initial meeting with the

client, the memorandum of understanding (MOU), the final presentation, and the production of the final product. Sometimes when deadlines closed in, tempers flared. Many times these confrontations occurred when set members did not produce their work on time or they did not do it to the standard of some other members of the ALS. This proved to throw the entire set's work pattern out of kilter.

> Ted - I felt stymied. I was ready to do a task which I am probably the best trained to do among our set, and Deborah literally held back the paper and said NO. What followed was as nasty a confrontation as I've ever seen. Later, all of us were back in the room. She openly questioned Darlene's ability to do the assignment. Her words and tone were vicious and condescending. I do not know how Darlene kept her calm. Toward the end of the discussion, Deborah was close to tears. Yet, she was the one making the bizarre statements. It appeared that she was very much afraid that the presentation, and therefore she, would not look good on Friday. It was all very strange. She was afraid, and she took out her fears on another set member.

Nevertheless, Deborah, perceived to be at the center of the conflict, had her own view of the incident.

> The negativity that began on Saturday continued throughout the week. Frustration levels rose and tempers flew. Our group had a difficult one this week. For me, the frustration stemmed from the fact that deadlines were not being met. Certain individuals were not completing their work by the days that they said that it would be done. In addition, we were still not making the threads throughout the paper that we should have been making. Pieces were being written in isolation. We made suggestions to eliminate certain pieces, not because they weren't valid, but because they were not connected to the findings and conclusions, or tied into the literature. It would appear that certain individuals did not appreciate the attempts (or the method) to bring the whole thing together. Communication fell apart and the norms were no longer respected.

Another member of the ALS related this account of the conflict and how she dealt with it.

> I don't think I am going to forget this day. I am left drained and I don't think I am getting my thoughts straight. Where did we go wrong? Or did we go wrong? How were the group norms that were written down forgotten? Conflict management. Well that is what it came down to. And, I am proud to say that we did manage it very well. I don't know how much damage was done, but for now we managed to stay focused on the task. I went back to reading the principles of conflict management that we learned in the Leadership class.

Across cases, other participants tried new coping behaviors and dealt with conflict in different ways. For instance,

> Nancy - As we get overwhelmed with the realities of our lives and jobs, we have a tendency to overlook the obvious and that is where the fresh eyes can help.
>
> Girod - Yes, the action learning set had to look and listen to both to each other (internal environment) and the client (external environment). By listening and looking in both environments we were well able to learn as we gathered and interpreted relevant information about the problem. To determine, "What has to happen here?" required much learning about what would work, what wouldn't work? Sensing a lack of clarity with our findings we refined them several times so that they would clearly point the way to reform.

The AL process definitely puts pressure on the members of ALS's. These pressure points center on the structural components built into AL: the memorandum of understanding (contract), the process, and the final presentation (product). As seen in the following example, participants were not expecting clients to be as interested in the problem solution as they were. Pressure was placed on individuals to perform. For instance,

> Jackie - I had to present for the group. I was extremely nervous. I felt that I had the weight of 5 grades on my shoulders - not an easy feat. At times during the other dress rehearsal presentations, I would distance myself, focusing on my own presentation. During the presentation, I looked at the audience. As I looked at the faces and wasn't sure about the nonverbal response. After the presentation, we waited in the hall. It took forever. What was everyone saying?

Assertion 3: Assertion Action Learning helps leaders learn to build community. Participants found that their AL experiences created the opportunity to strengthen building community skills by building trust, and employing communicating, decision -making, and conflict management skills. As many participants related, trust is the linchpin to building community. They thought trust was built into the AL activity in many ways. For example,

> A leader has to be able to get beyond the superficial. Getting "real" answers is incumbent on the leaders ability to gain trust. People need to believe that information they reveal is not going to be used against them or in a negative manner. It's about being able to divulge without the fear of repercussion - knowing that it's okay to disagree, and still be respected and valued for whom you are and what you can contribute to the group.

To some participants the process was related to empowering others:

> Pat - It was affirming to know that a good leader has to look for wisdom, for expertise in the quiet ones, the ones who are hiding in plain sight. Hire the best and them trust them to do their job. It's puzzling to me that this concept is lacking from so many leaders. A personal learning goal is to improve my Cat and Mouse game! To better learn how to power and influence work in organizations and learn how to sell the skills inside me.

> Jason - Trust is a very important element in a group process. It does not happen without good communication, a commitment to the growth of other people, and the freedom to empower each other. There is a nurturing and building of community as we get to know each other. I have found that I share some religious beliefs with one of my fellow participants, and that has helped me want to understand his perspective as a principal and a friend, not just a fellow researcher. Personal relationships are a key to good learning processes.

And still, to others, the key was creating an atmosphere of civility.

> I think it is important as a leader to impress upon your staff and colleagues the impression that all ideas and suggestions are valid and encouraged. To do so requires a mutual trust and respect that needs to be earned, not taken for grated. In order to earn trust and respect you have to give mutual trust and respect. If, as a leader, I can instill in trust and earn the respect of my co-workers, I feel I will have done well.

In another ALS, the issue of civility was negotiated at the beginning of the AL activity.

> At the start of our project, we all agreed it was okay to disagree, and all ideas would be considered. It was these initial ground rules that kept us on track and allowed for the discussion, and in the end, we came up with a working plan we could all agree on. I think as a leader, (in most cases, perhaps not all) you want your subordinates to understand that all ideas and suggestions have merit. There should exist an atmosphere of progressive thought, for it is from these humble beginnings, if given a chance, great ideas can and often do bloom.

Some class members worked together previously on different projects, while other set members were far less familiar with each other. For some members, there were assumptions about certain individuals that already tainted their working relationships, even before the process got underway. In these cases, assumptions were either positive or negative, but hardly ever neutral. For other students, feelings about set members would form and reform throughout the AL process. These feelings about a situation or a person were usually

temporary, until the set worked through the challenging issue. For the most part once an issue was resolved, set members left the problem behind, and uncooperative feelings were replaced by feelings of accomplishment and renewed cooperation. There were, however, exceptions to this when the temporary nature of "working through" issues was never really resolved. In this instance, a set might experience tensions throughout the entire process, leaving set members having to either come to terms with how to work "with" one another, or tacitly agree to get the project done and go their separate ways. This tacit agreement, although never verbally stated, was an invisible group norm expressed in the reflection journals. As one student states,

> [In the end,] I tended to drift away with Randy and Sharon, leaving Thomas alone, and Victor wandering somewhere. We just could not huddle [together] as most groups did. The only time we got together was to meet on our own time to work on the project. Sharon played a great role in mending the pieces together and moving forward with the project each time that one concession or another was made in the group. Indeed we forged ahead and pushed ourselves to make this deadline for our presentation. Yes, we could have accepted an incomplete from the university, but we would never have painted ourselves as "incomplete" in the eyes of the district. I think that the value we placed on our reputations in this district was the true search-engine for this silent compromise for our set as D-Day approached. Too, the dynamics in the group noticeably changed. Randy and Sharon took on more and more control and responsibility of the paper. Thomas acted more like a woman after labor and successful delivery, "Oof, my job is done.... You docs and nurses go ahead with the rest."

A different set member viewed the same situation this way:

> The atmosphere at this meeting was very different from our past meetings. Everyone seemed tired and a bit cranky. Having worked with these individuals for the past two years, I know our set was comprised of some strong personalities. I wondered how long it would be before there was a display of conflicting points of view. It came today. It seemed like the disagreement was over unimportant issues, like the wording of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) [client agreement]. My mediator personality came out and I tried to offer a compromise that was agreeable to all. I think everyone finally realized the silliness of the differences and we were able to move on.

During the course students engage in activities that help them identify different personality types. One of the students reflects on a conversation he had earlier with the facilitator:

> I know I told you that I knew that I would not be able to work with the "X" set a few weeks ago, because I didn't feel like I fit into their group. Ironically all of them identified themselves as certain personalities. I learned that it could be a good challenge to work with people with opposing personality types, but I still feel like it would have been difficult working in that group. My group has members representing all the personality types. I feel like there is a nice mix and we are able to balance each other and work well together.

The balance among set members appears to play a critical role in the interpersonal relationships among set members. Set members, however, were also assigned to other working groups called hybrid groups. These groups allowed for the set members to have the opportunity to work on class projects of short duration, while exchanging ideas with different set members. One class member states,

> I think being assigned to hybrid groups is a good thing. Being a part of another group will provide different perspectives and insights into each set's problems.

Another class member relates her first experience in the hybrid group:

> I personally was not happy with my hybrid set when no one worked together to plan the first presentation. However, being the type of person I am, after emailing and not receiving answers, I organized some materials about learning communities and went to class ready to share. I approached Terry and all she said was, "Don't worry, I have it all done." She wasn't interested in my contribution, and then she left for the afternoon, not bothering to tell me she would not be here.... This experience was new...when talking to others in my set, it seems their experiences were similar. ...However, after the personality exercise, the ice seemed to be broken and we seemed more at ease. Perhaps, the new hybrid sets will work better now that we understand each other.

Developing ease and acceptance of one another's differences is important to the process. This takes time with ways to help students build community. The personality exercise was helpful in this regard, but more needs to be done in the future to foster a sense of community.

Assertion 5: Action Learning reinforces the development of basic leadership skills. Leaders have long depended on their communication, decision-making, and conflict management skills to survive and move their organizations forward. In the context of this group project, the same skills needed in other administrative venues were used and necessary to the successful completion of the projects. In most cases the use of the decision-making, communication, conflict management skills were essential. The ability to

motivate was less visible because set members were highly motivated from the beginning of the project to the end. In regard to group motivation, it seemed that most of the groups had a professional as well as an academic stake in the outcome. The reliance on these basic leadership skills was clearly visible in the actions of all ALS's.

> Damon - As I look at the facilitator 's management/leadership framework, which hangs on a poster size post-it over my computer desk (next to a framework which is a compilation of Senge, McCarthy, Bolman & Deal, and Greenleaf), I see the leadership skills, which were utilized and practiced, as part of this action learning course.
>
> Jeff - The action learning course kept us constantly going around the circle in terms of planning, organizing, allocating, and monitoring for the problem of teacher recruitment and retention. Within that circle, we were motivating each other to complete the project and keep working on it. We had to solve the problems of gaining access to the interviewees and of finding time for us to work together to assemble our data. Communicating was not at its best. Sometimes there were days in which we did not receive any email from each other. The conflicts of those working for the district were difficult to conquer. Although we had "normed" decision making as consensus building, it was often done by one or two to keep the whole thing moving. All of these things occur in "real life" also.

Every set experienced the leadership skills or the lack of them.

> Chrys - Each of the administrative processes was being used at various levels and with different people throughout the action learning activities. Within the group, we had to solve problems concerning the timing of meetings and the availability of people, the undeniable influence of hidden agendas. Then decisions had to be made. Communication was essential and when that failed, conflict management was a tool that became part of the dynamics. This occurred more so earlier on in the set's progress, and less once roles were developed and leadership skills and styles emerged.
>
> Russ - Conflict management, communications, decision making, problem solving are key skills that we use every day, whether we are aware of it or not. However, these skills were used extensively within the set. Decision making and problem solving skills were used throughout the course as they applied to simply working through logistical problems so that the set could meet...to using skills that would enable the set to arrive at conclusions based on our research. At the onset of this project, we agreed that all decisions would be made unanimously rather than by consensus. All decisions were made with our goal (to solve the client's problem cost-effectively and offer recommendations for doing so) in mind.

> Rachel - While we used tools from all aspects of the administrative process. Communication was invaluable and something we all had to utilize to get us through a difficult time. As I see it, communication paved the way for the use of problem solving techniques, conflict management techniques and decision-making. As long as we had good strong communication, the other processes were in place. This leads me to believe that the communication aspect of our job as leaders is most important. To use conflict management skills, one must be willing and able to communicate. In our difficult time, we were not communicating. When we were not communicating, everything fell apart. We no longer were capable of using conflict management techniques, problem solving.

Several ALS's employed the use of the role of a central communicator. One ALS found that by creating the role of central communicator they were shut out of important interactions and subject to what the communicator would report to the client and the set members. One student notes,

> I think that the overall action learning set activities have indeed reinforced the processes of decision-making and problem solving, communication, motivation, and conflict management. Our involvement through action learning provided us an opportunity to closely evaluate our own methods of the leadership processes above. Because we had already had the leadership courses, it is easier to look back and know that the knowledge was useful before setting out in our teams. In our set, we dealt with every issue (with the exception of conflict management) by working together to figure out what worked best for us as a team. Though there were difficulties along the way, the set norms we established at the beginning of the semester assisted us in these processes.

Assertion 6: Action learning reinforces managerial, political, professional and transformational dimensions of leadership. Action learning is fraught with political and practical consequences. These difficulties support the need to focus on the learning aspects for leadership development rather than the solution aspects of the projects. The pressure of who the client was and with whom the ALS members worked for created political and ethical issues the ALS had to grapple with constantly.

> James - At times, each of us on the team had to bring their political skills to the table, each of us had to draw on their managerial and professional experience and, some of us were transformed into leaders at one time or another. Some volunteered and some were drafted.

> Sheri - Obviously, the strategic leader is one who is able to use each of the four dimensions and adapt their talents and skills according to the situation...maintaining stability while implementing change. I believe each of the set members used these dimensions as we moved toward our goal

> of providing the client with an answer to their problem. All of us were able to define our direction (Transformational) and use the planning, organizing, allocating and monitoring (Managerial) dimensions to achieve the target. We were constantly challenges by the practicalities of what is possible (Political) and what is right (Professional). We gathered the necessary data and used the resources available to us in an efficient manner...although along the way, we may have changed some of our methods for reaching our goal, but we stayed focused achieved our mission.

Although members acknowledge the political issues, focus was paramount.

> We have been working very hard to prepare the agenda, format and to address the right questions when we meet with our client. I can see how Angela, Norman, Randy and I are feeling the pressure much more than Sharon is. The fact remains that the four of us work for the school district. Besides the regular pressure of being successful in our class, we would like to assure both the superintendent and our professor that we will do a great job investigating the problem presented to us.

Yet, another set member saw teammates through their ability to look at the problem more objectively.

> Pat - Lucy is so focused on her perspective as a principal, that she can't see the problem objectively. She is also afraid of what other principals will think of her for "snooping" around their problems. Karon and I are the only two members of the group who have an objective point of view. My conflict is that the action learning process seems to be better suited to being used by people within the organization. But it's not working that way because Lucy, Norman, and Karon are unsure about their administration's position. . . . Writing the narrative about what the real problem is probably will not happen because of Lucy, Norman, and Karon will need to demonstrate their loyalty to the district. As Lucy related, 'it is my goal to approach this problem professionally so that I will not be a part of a team who generates criticism towards my district. I want to show leadership to become a part of the solution.'

> Bill described the ALS problem he worked on as politically packed. We had our own issues related to our positions both at work and in the cohort. Our project was also connected to the highest political powers of our school system. This was a conflict for us throughout the project. The goals were multiple. We all wanted to make this class work for us as well as the cohort. We all wanted this project to have validity while we did not want to kill ourselves politically. Our district is in a tumultuous time. We want to believe things are different and we can speak openly, but none of

> us feels secure in that. Therein lies the dilemma. Not one person in this group is here to "get done." We all want what we do to "matter" in the big scheme of things. Our problem is how to make it matter without hurting ourselves for the future. We are not worried about "looking Good" as much as we are worried about presenting a dissenting opinion that will injure us in the long haul. So...we want to be professional and do it right while being politically correct. I think we can pull it off!

Some participants without ties to the client are not as easily lured into the politically correct reporting. In a particularly rich discussion of his frustration with political realities, Jason posed a learning challenge for himself.

> One area that I need to work on is the understanding that things don't always have to be done my way!! I think part of the problem I have is getting my ideas across to other people who think differently or have strong opposing ideas, especially when the opposing group all have the same background and mentality. Often times in my ALS I have been outvoted - majority rules. It's hard as an outsider to overcome the majority. I have a tendency, in this project, to look at many of the "symptoms" identified in our discussions, as manifestations of a deeper rooted problem. I want to look deeper, but feel politics are preventing this from happening. I don't have the "fear" of telling our client something he may or may not want to hear.

Assertion 6: Action learning allows participants to apply previous learnings to real problems. We found that the AL approach added value and validity, both through the process and the product produced by embedding lessons of the classroom with applications in a practice setting. The classes in leadership, organizational behavior, and qualitative and quantitative research were seen as the key courses to take before engaging in the action learning experience. The benefits of the leadership classes are obvious from the previous sections of this case study.

The research tools that were used by various sets included unobtrusive measures, instrumentation design, focus groups, individual interviews, data collection and analysis. The use of these skills created many needs for skill improvement on the part of the participants. As ALS members expressed,

> Ira - I need to understand research methodology better. I understand qualitative methods very well now, but the quantitative is still fuzzy. Perhaps it would have been better if I had had advanced statistics before doing the action learning class. I will read through my books on research that I have at home and through the library and online. Numbers are becoming more important to me, and I want to be able to use them masterfully in any administrative role. However, I hope and pray that

people will remain my first concern and that I will always see them as more important than the numbers.

Marilyn - It was pleasing for us to realize that we were using techniques that we had learned about in the Qualitative Research class last summer...I guess that's what it's all about.

Other classmates believed that the research methods assisted the students in grounding their recommendations.

Realizing our goal, we performed the research (document analysis, interviews, observations, etc.) necessary to arrive at conclusions and emerging themes that we could base our recommendations on...recommendations designed to transform our client's organization advisement procedures.

Assertion 7: Action Learning was a meaningful class.... frustrating, but meaningful. In some ways the group norms reflected the maturity of the sets. Each of ALSs establishes norms to guide their work together. Typically, the norms address such things as:

- Arriving on time
- Calling if you can not be on time
- Asking hard questions
- Speaking up
- Keeping the group fluid and not building cliques
- Refusing to become overly sensitive
- Admitting if you can not do something, so someone else can take over
- Facilitating each other's goals to ensure growth

But one set outlined five areas, with specific routines under each of the areas for all set members to follow. Under "sharing information," point number four, the group defines it this way: "Every set member will have the opportunity to present their findings each week to the group. The time allotted for sharing will be 5-10 minutes, followed up by questions from the group." From the onset, roles, flexibility, what to bring to the meetings, and ways to handle conflict were addressed. In-depth meeting minutes were taken and all correspondence was kept in a notebook one set member agreed to oversee. The notebook was brought to all set meetings and frequently referred to by members to clarify roles and established procedures. Clear timelines and responsibilities were delineated for set members.

This ALS met all of the deadlines well ahead of the other two sets throughout the course. One set member from this group reflects on the initial meeting with the client. "We were all so prepared and it was obvious we had practiced our individual parts. Yet, at the same time, we were aware of everyone else's part... I think we have a big task ahead of us, but I think we can handle it."

The optimism of this set member is reflected in her assessment of the group's ability to complete the task. Ultimately, however, completing the task efficiently seems linked to the set members' perceptions of the group's ability to work together. Yet, regardless of the quality of the group dynamics, none of the sets was deterred from completing the project. Given the client feedback, even the group that experienced the most turmoil, had high client ratings of satisfaction with the recommendations. Thus productivity, when viewed as producing the final report and recommendations, was not negatively impacted by the group dynamics. In regard to the human productivity factor, some sets appeared to work with the ease and grace of a gifted ballerina, while other sets struggled like a fledgling trying to learn to fly.

> Michele - The Action Learning process was at times frustrating, chaotic, humbling, and challenging. I thought our experiences working together in previous classes would make some of the challenges in working in a group less stressful. I believe that was a naive thought.
>
> John - Our adventure has now come to an end or has it? Maybe our adventure is just beginning. Action learning was to me, like taking baby steps into the real world. It tested my knowledge, my experience, and a chance to follow and implement some of the important lessons I had learned in my classes. I usually had the habit of asking, why am I learning this; how is it connected to real life problems and issues; what is the connection between the knowledge gained and my life goals. Never have I ever been in such a situation where I had to bring in all the knowledge that I had gained from the classes I had taken. Suddenly, they were not just classes and textbooks, but real life guidelines on how to accomplish a task, how to communicate, how to manage conflict and how to be a leader. Under the different situation that I was in, it gave me time to reflect on what the different authors had said, and how true they were to real life.

Action learning seemed to be a valuable experience for most students.

> Deborah - Action learning project had been a great personal learning experience, which showed me what my strengths are and what are the areas I need to work on. With a wealth of knowledge behind me, I know I am much better equipped to place myself in leadership roles.
>
> Paul - The course has also developed my effectiveness in meetings and committees by the way it teaches to ask the tough or richer questions. Recently, I noticed that I have begun to ask better questions in committee meetings.

Assertion 8: Action learning allows participants to reflect upon themselves as developing leaders. Set members came away from the AL process with

different learnings. Some of the learnings were personal in nature, while others concerned the AL process itself. One student said,

> It seems that leaders need to understand the process of action learning better than anyone. This would allow for them to implement the program, and to be sure it would be done correctly. Those leaders that are well informed about action learning, probably already have effective learning organizations.

This student gleans the importance of putting learning structures in place within an organization to promote learning amongst members.

As seen in previous paragraphs, there were many individual transformations made during the action learning experience. Some less obvious learnings include:

> Jason - One of my key learnings lately, both personally and professionally ... that you can never thank or appreciate another person enough for the work they are doing. I don't know when the last time I mentioned it was, but I really am thankful for the group I was assigned to and believe that this experience would not have been nearly as positive or successful with any other set. My goal to contribute and be useful to my set I believe I have done a good job with. There have been times when I have been overwhelmed, yet I know that I have done the best that I could – just like the rest of my set. We have worked together well and will find out next week if it was a success in the eyes of our clients.
>
> Michele - I am relieved this project is over. I struggle with leadership, management and delegation. These three simple words will definitely make or break a high school principal. I have found this whole Action Learning experience upsetting, not because of the project, but because it could reflect a school that is not focused. I just recently applied for an internship to become a principal and I have reflected on my own personal leadership skills and have critically looked at this project. It is painfully obvious to me now that sometimes it not just getting the job done, but the journey along the way. I think I definitely missed the path this time.
>
> Ira - The project that the ALS undertook has enhanced my ability to problem solve in collaborative manner. Dealing with four other individuals who have very different ideas about the project helped become more accepting of other ideas and it also helped me learn more about other people's experience and background. During the group process, I found that I was more articulate than usual, since at times I felt that it was necessary to guide the set in order to complete our many tasks. I still feel that this is an area that I need to work on more diligently after I finish my dissertation. Throughout the process I felt I was motivated not only to

learn, and complete the project, but also to enjoy the process. I found that that was a new experience.

Pat - My personal learning goal for this week is to work on my listening skills. I found myself wanting to comment on what the interviewees had to say about recruitment and retention. I had to make a conscience effort to keep my mouth closed and to just listen.

Jack - It is rare for me to struggle with any class, and so it is incredibly frustrating when I do. Apparently the struggle and pain are great catalysts for my learning and retaining information in those classes. I believe that this class will be transformative for me. "I experienced growing pains in this course, and that was good. It didn't feel good at the time, but it is not a new experience, either. Fortunately, all the happenings in the heart that contribute to learning are not so painful. I appreciate all the learning, and I have had reaffirmed for me the importance of taking the cup of knowledge and drinking from it on my own – not expecting it to be gently poured down my throat for me. This is a lesson not only in education but also in leadership – what a coincidence!

There were other insights about organizational behavior as well. After the class viewed the video the, "Abilene Paradox," one student commented, When we viewed the video about the "Abilene Paradox," suddenly I understood what an amazing thing it was that my set was able to communicate openly about the [work] and chose to take a different road. All us communicated with each other and rather than just going down the road that was prescribed ....we didn't take the road to Abilene! This realization was truly a great learning moment. It brought home the importance of voicing one's true opinion. How often do bad things happen because people are afraid to ask the hard questions or state the obvious? I don't think I will ever forget the story about the road to Abilene.

On a personal level, another set member thinks about how she is as a person.

I am not a patient person. Reflecting is helping me look deeper and take some time to think. I'm practicing listening. I tend to always speak and offer an opinion. I'm realizing that there is learning in listening. I used to question other people's motives if they were quiet. Are they being critical of others? Are they snobs? Are they sitting back, waiting for others to make mistakes so that they can show their superiority? I'm becoming less suspicious while I learn to listen.

Conclusions

As most educational leadership programs, Florida Atlantic University strives for relevancy in preparing educational leaders. As we rethought our

program three years ago we desired to add value to our university, students and professional communities in the development and preparation of educational leaders. We studied the various methodologies available to us to connect to the world of practice and decided to adopt action learning. We invited a noted Action Learning scholar to campus to share the concept, benefits and pitfalls with our faculty, students. We engaged our professional communities in supporting the concept. We decided to pilot test the concept and study the results.

This paper contains the results of our pilot test. We simply wished to answer the question, is action learning a leadership development activity that can be used by university educational leadership preparation programs to bridge the gap between theory and practice. We found eight points of relevance that has convinced us to continue to use action learning to close the abyss. These eight findings clustered into three broad themes across cases (a) the role of group dynamics, (b) overall group productivity, and (c) the extent of personal learnings and insights.

The first theme, the role of group dynamics, describes the intersection of interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships between set members, among different set members, and with the client. The reflective journals, set meeting agendas and notes, surveys, and participant observations illustrated how set dynamics revolve around issues of respect, levels of personal comfort or discomfort in sharing personal feelings and confronting issues, power and control matters, listening to one another, extent of empathy, personal risk taking behaviors, and levels of trust among group members.

Group productivity, the second theme, defines the ability of the set to get the work done in spite of obstacles. The client report, final presentation, recommendations implemented by the client, client surveys all support the fact that the sets were productive, in spite of some of the sets' dynamics. Having contingency plans, personal habits such as punctuality, the ability of the set to multi-task and share their work load, willingness to be flexible, the ability to see ahead, work as a team player, know when to ask for help, build on the strengths of individual team members, and take high levels of personal responsibility and accountability, are all critical to the group's productivity.

Finally, in the area of personal learning and insights, students wrestled with their own personal learning goals, in lieu of their group's support or detrimental behaviors. Posing questions about the violations of group norms is important to the process. Through the sharing of information, ongoing feedback, and reflection, personal learnings and insights are fraught with challenges about simultaneously stepping outside of the process, while working within it.

As facilitators what we took away from the experience is that all experience (good or bad) is good if it is processed and used as a springboard for improvement. In this way, we concluded that action learning could

simultaneously develop problem-solving skills, promote leadership development, offer experiences in team dynamics and lead to transformative learning among participants. In many ways action learning was transformative for many of our students. It challenged them to make meaning of their experience to guide their future actions. They learned about themselves as leaders and as individuals in several ways.

First, transformation appears to result from the intensity of the experience, coupled with ongoing reflection, and insights gained about "self" through ongoing introspection. Second, set meetings were viewed as open opportunities for learning: times to practice different leadership skills, and apply recently acquired research techniques. Third, this experience-based activity includes peers reflecting on each other's experiences through focused feedback given to students to improve their presentation to clients, and increase and insure their recommendations are meaningful and grounded in the evidence gathered. Finally, although there was an initial belief that development of leadership skills might occur, including personal development and leadership development, we found evidence to support that this happened personally and in the set's development. We conclude that these student benefits have the potential to impact the organizations these students work. And as facilitators, we see a new confidence in our doctoral students as they complete other phases of their programs.

Second, we also believe that action learning adds validity to our leadership program by providing pathways to the work place. We see the following benefits of action learning to the university and its professors: (a) student application of knowledge in a real setting, (b) insights about why educational institutions are so difficult to change, and (c) better relationships with local educational agencies. Because action learning can simultaneously develop problem-solving skills and promote leadership development, students have the opportunity to practice communication skills, conflict negotiation, and decision making that can lead to transformative learning among participants. In a very real way action learning bridges the abyss in preparation programs with the work place. While the action learning experience is more like what real leaders do everyday in schools, there is a massive retraining needed of those practitioners schooled in rational models of decision making and organizations. This approach provides them a viable alternative.

A second big learning for us was the fact that members in these ALS are felt it was unprofessional to report bad news to their clients and/or their institutions. One wonders how educational organizations can ever improve with the level of mistrust observed with those who work in the system. Certainly the clients did not appear to foster this fear. Yet, the pull of colleagues and culture was very strong in the organizations our students work. Thus, at the university level, professors of educational leadership are often left bewildered at why systems seem so resilient to change. We developed a better understanding

about the fear students perceived in pointing out better ways to do things. We also believe that some concepts underlying action learning may not play out in the real world of educational leadership. "It is important as a leader, and future leader, to allow for growth and free expression. Assuming of course that free expression and free thinking are accepted and solicited as part of staying current in a dynamic organization and world." We noticed through these ALS's that participants either feel it is unprofessional to report bad news to clients or their institutions' do not welcome it. One wonders how educational organizations can ever improve with the level of paranoia we have seen in those who work in the system. Certainly the superintendents of the school district clients were leaders who did not foster fear. But the pull of colleagues and culture is very strong in the organizations our students work.

The benefits to the client are many. The client gains a fresh perspective on a difficult problem. As one of the clients shared at the conclusion of the process, systems benefit from the recommendations of very bright and knowledgeable doctoral students, while students see critical issues facing educators in the field. Thus this method provides the university a legitimate role in helping students begin to institutionalize some of their knowledge, while building stronger connections with the field. The client also often shares the report with other members within the organization as a basis for initiating change. The power of data, backed up with strong evidence of support, provides a powerful venue for moving the system forward with the proposed recommendations for change. Lastly, the client is aware that set members do not have a vested interest in the recommendations, thus making the recommendations more palpable.

Based on our findings we were pleased that we had added the action learning component into the doctoral sequence and so were our students. Their suggestions on placement in program (their main concern) are being considered. In this pilot test, the course was placed at the end of the second year prior to the dissertation phase. We feel that a more appropriate placement should be found. Our thoughts are to place it the end of the two doctoral leadership courses and the qualitative and quantitative research methods courses. In effect, it should be offered in a six week summer session at the end of the first year of matriculation. Wherever the course is placed, however, we would advise that both qualitative and quantitative research methods courses be taken prior to this course, as well as foundational leadership courses.

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